

Chapter 41

Rocky watched Antonio disappear through the pub door with the Scottish woman and took another slow sip of his ale.

He smiled to himself.

“Good for you.”

There was no teasing.

No judgment.

Just the quiet satisfaction of seeing an old friend laugh the way he used to.

Outside, Antonio held the door while Isla stepped into the cool London evening.

“So...” he said.

“So,” she echoed.

They stood there for a second, neither quite sure who was supposed to start walking first.

“You understood maybe...half of what I said tonight.”

Antonio laughed, he was finally starting to understand her accent although her dialect still made it hard to fully communicate.

“I was hoping it was closer to sixty percent.”

“It wisnae.”

“...I don’t know what that means.”

“It means no.”

“I was afraid of that.”

She laughed again, the same bright laugh that had carried them through most of the evening.

“You never pretended tae understand.”

“Oh, I absolutely pretended.”

“I noticed.”

“I just figured confidence was my best strategy.”

“It was a terrible strategy.”

“It worked.”

She looked over at him with a smile.

“It somehow did.”

Her flat was only a few blocks away.

The streets had grown quieter, the last of the commuters replaced by couples walking home, late dinners spilling laughter through restaurant windows, and the occasional black cab gliding past beneath the streetlights.

Antonio shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

“I’ve got a confession.”

“Oh?”

“I spent most of tonight answering questions you never asked.”

“Aye.”

“There it is again.”

She laughed.

“Aye.”

“I still don’t know what that means.”

“It means yes.”

Antonio nodded thoughtfully.

“I feel like you people are making English unnecessarily difficult.”

“We invented it.”

“I’m beginning to suspect that was a mistake.”

She bumped his shoulder gently with hers.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“I imagine ye have.”

Her apartment occupied the second floor of an old brick building overlooking a quiet side street.

It wasn’t large.

It was comfortable.

Books rested on a small shelf beside the sofa.

A record player sat near the window.

Two mugs waited in the sink from that morning.

It looked lived in.

Honest.

Antonio looked around.

“I like it.”

She shrugged out of her coat.

“It feels like home.”

“I think that’s why I like it.”

There was no performance between them.

No elaborate seduction.

No awkward attempt to become younger than they were.

Two adults who had spent the evening laughing simply continued enjoying one another’s company.

They talked for another little while.

About Scotland.

About New York.

About why Americans insisted on putting ice in everything.

About why the British seemed determined to boil vegetables until they surrendered.

Eventually, the conversation became quieter.

Not because they had run out of things to say.

Because they no longer needed words quite as much.

Isla stepped closer.

“So...”

“So.”

She smiled.

“I think ye’ve finally understood enough Scottish for one night.”

“I don’t know...”

Antonio grinned.

“I think I’ve almost got it.”

She reached up and kissed him.

Softly.

Patiently.

When she pulled back, she rested her forehead against his.

“I’ve wanted tae do that fer at least an hour.”

Antonio smiled.

“I was hoping.”

She took his hand and led him toward the bedroom.

The room was warmly lit by a single bedside lamp.

Nothing about the moment felt hurried.

Nothing felt uncertain.

As Antonio gently drew her close, preparing to lay her back onto the bed, he paused.

She looked at him curiously.

“What?”

He searched her face for a moment.

“Just to confirm...”

He smiled sheepishly.

“...you want this, right?”

Her expression softened immediately.

She reached up and brushed her thumb across his cheek.

“Aye.”

Antonio blinked.

“...Aye means yes...right?”

She laughed.

“Yes.”

“Aye means aye.”

He frowned dramatically.

“Someone really needs to come over here and teach you people English.”

She laughed so hard she had to hide her face against his shoulder.

“I’ll tell the whole of Scotland.”

“Please do.”

“I’ll start a petition.”

“I’ll sign it.”

Still smiling, she kissed him again.

The laughter faded into quiet.

The quiet became closeness.

Outside, London carried on without noticing.

Rain whispered softly against the window.

A distant siren echoed somewhere across the city before fading into the night.

Inside, two people who had met only hours before discovered that warmth sometimes arrives unexpectedly—not with fireworks or destiny, but with kindness, honesty, shared laughter, and a simple question asked at exactly the right moment.

The bedside lamp clicked softly off.

The hotel hallway was unusually quiet.

Most of the guests had already disappeared behind closed doors.

Somewhere farther down the corridor, an elevator chimed softly.

William unlocked the suite.

Neither of them spoke much.

They didn’t need to.

The room felt warmer than they remembered.

Claire set her notebook on the desk.

William quietly closed the curtains overlooking London.

“I’ll...”

Claire nodded toward the bathroom.

“...just be a minute.”

William nodded.

“Okay.”

The bathroom door closed gently behind her.

William stood alone for several seconds.

He looked around the room as though seeing it for the first time.

Then, realizing he had absolutely no idea what one was supposed to do in this situation, he changed into his boxers, climbed into bed, and immediately decided that lying perfectly still somehow seemed like the correct answer.

It wasn't.

He sat up.

Lay back down.

Adjusted the pillow.

Changed his mind again.

Eventually he settled somewhere between sitting and lying, convinced he looked completely natural.

He did not.

The bathroom door opened.

Claire stepped out wearing the hotel's white robe, her damp hair falling loosely around her shoulders.

She smiled the moment she saw him.

“Nervous?”

William answered far too honestly.

“...Maybe.”

She walked toward him.

He climbed out of bed to meet her halfway across the room.

The lights had been switched off except for the small bedside lamp, leaving the room wrapped in warm shadows.

As they stood facing one another, William shivered.

Claire smiled.

“Are you cold?”

“Maybe a little.”

Without saying another word, she loosened the robe from her shoulders and drew it gently around both of them instead, wrapping them together inside the soft fabric.

Their foreheads almost touched.

Their bodies naturally settled close.

For a moment neither moved.

Neither needed to.

William smiled nervously.

“This is...”

He searched unsuccessfully for words.

Claire rescued him.

“I know.”

Together they turned toward the bed.

The first step was awkward.

The second even more so.

They both laughed quietly.

Neither had done this before.

Not together.

Not like this.

William accidentally stepped on the edge of the robe.

Claire caught herself before losing her balance.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

Two more careful steps.

William leaned the wrong way and managed to pin a loose strand of Claire’s hair beneath his shoulder.

She winced softly.

“Oh!”

He immediately moved.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, really, I’m—”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry for apologizing.”

Claire smiled.

“You apologize a lot.”

“I know.”

“I just—”

She kissed him.

When the kiss ended, she rested her forehead against his once more.

“There.”

“Better?”

William nodded.

“Much.”

She took his hand.

Together they crossed the last few steps to the bed.

The bedside lamp clicked softly off.

Beyond the window, London continued its quiet conversation with the night.

Inside, two young people who had spent a week discovering one another no longer needed words.

The rest of the evening belonged only to them, unfolding with tenderness, trust, and the quiet awkwardness of first love